

Pandemic Influenza (Flu)

Frequently Asked Questions for Federal Managers



1. **What is an influenza pandemic?**

A pandemic is a global disease outbreak. It occurs when a new influenza strain emerges for which there is little or no immunity in humans. It can cause serious illness to people worldwide.

2. **Is a pandemic imminent?**

Three influenza pandemics have occurred in the past century: the Spanish Flu in 1918-19, the Asian Flu in 1957-58, and the Hong Kong Flu in 1968-69. Many scientists believe it is only a matter of time until the next pandemic occurs. However, the timing and severity of the next pandemic cannot be accurately predicted.

3. **How would an influenza pandemic affect communities and businesses?**

In an influenza pandemic, possibly 30% or more of the workforce will be absent due to illness or due to assisting sick family members. Large-scale absences can affect every aspect of daily life, including public transportation, communication systems, utilities, businesses, and even food supplies. Local communities, schools, civic organizations, and businesses will have to work together to plan for a pandemic response.

4. **Why are agencies being asked to prepare for a pandemic at a local level? Isn't this the role of the major public health agencies?**

Typically, disaster-affected areas rely on assistance from local, state and federal entities in unaffected areas. However, in the case of a pandemic, affected areas are not localized. Therefore, everyone outside your immediate area will likely be equally affected. However in the case of pandemic, incidence is so widespread that most localities will be unable to provide assistance to others due to limited resources of their own.

5. **Will this year's annual flu vaccine protect people against an influenza pandemic?**

No, *this year's* flu vaccine will not protect people against an influenza pandemic. Annual flu vaccines are designed to protect against the most common flu strains prevalent in a given year. By definition, a pandemic strain is a new strain that has not appeared before and therefore existing vaccines provide little or no protection.

6. **Can a vaccine be made to protect against an influenza pandemic?**

Technically, a vaccine can be made to protect against an influenza pandemic. However, it is scientifically challenging to produce a vaccine before the actual pandemic flu virus appears. It generally takes at least 6 months or more to develop, test and mass-produce a new vaccine. Because transmission could be rapid, millions of people could already have been infected during that time.

7. **What is the difference between a vaccine and an antiviral?**

Vaccines are preventive medication usually given by injection before an outbreak occurs to stimulate an immune response that protects against the virus. Antivirals are medication treatments for those who have already been infected by a virus or to minimize or prevent infection for persons recently exposed.

8. **How will vaccine be distributed if a pandemic breaks out?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) along with other public health authorities will work with manufacturers, distributors and states to distribute any available vaccine as rapidly as possible. Protecting people at highest risk for complications and death as well as preserving essential day-to-day services will be important considerations.

9. **How would antivirals be used? Should our agency be stockpiling antivirals?**

Antivirals are a potentially powerful weapon to use during an influenza pandemic. Antiviral medications are best used for those with early symptoms or at most risk for deadly flu complications, and to prevent infection when there are known or anticipated exposures. Currently, there are no recommendations for any agency – other than public health authorities – to stockpile antiviral medications. There are several reasons for this including the high cost of stockpiling, limited supplies, and questions regarding effectiveness. Antiviral overuse can reduce their effectiveness when they're most needed.

10. **How should my agency start to prepare for a pandemic?**

There are a variety of ways in which your agency can begin to prepare, including:

- As part of your agency's Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP), develop a pandemic contingency plan that includes coordination with local resources and parent agencies/organizations. Engage and cooperate with critical players such as unions, the Federal Executive Board, state, local, and private entities.
- Expect minimal outside assistance.
- Consider how short term goods/services interruptions might affect your operations.
- Provide education to employees across several topic areas including pandemic facts, prevention measures, and your agency-specific pandemic plan.
- Update your pandemic and COOP plans as you receive new information.
- Frequently check the HHS pandemic flu site at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>. This site is comprehensive and includes planning data for federal agencies.

11. **What can employees do to prepare and protect themselves?**

- Stay informed of influenza developments.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Wash hands frequently with soap and water and keep hands away from your face.
- Teach hygiene practices to children and reinforce their practice.
- Stay away from people who are sick and stay home if sick.
- Get seasonal flu shots.
- Practice an overall healthy lifestyle.
- Review the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) preparedness checklists at <http://www.pandemicflu.gov/>.

12. **What role will FOH play during a pandemic?**

FOH Occupational Health Centers (OHCs) are *not* equipped to provide acute or extended care for influenza. However, FOH is prepared to:

- Act as a training and education resource for agencies and their employees.
- Provide up-to-date pandemic-related information to customer agencies.
- Provide agencies with an in-depth review of pandemic plans.
- Provide vaccinations (if available) according to CDC recommendations.
- Distribute antivirals (if available) should the HHS approve such a plan.
- Provide counseling and stress management services.
- Procure and distribute protective equipment where appropriate.

13. **What role will Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as masks play?**

Because the virus is easily spread by multiple routes, the use of masks, gloves, and gowns by the general public is not likely to prevent the spread of influenza. However, if you have the flu and are coughing and sneezing, you may provide some protection to people in the immediate vicinity by wearing a mask. Disposable masks cannot be cleaned or disinfected and can also be a source of contamination if handled.

14. **What about other various protection strategies and products being advertised?**

Keep a healthy skepticism about products that promise to reduce risks before or during a pandemic. Check with an FOH nurse or other reliable sources such as the CDC if there are any questions about the effectiveness of specific practices or products.

Employers have great potential to help minimize the effects of a pandemic. For more information, contact your local FOH Occupational Health Center, visit our website at www.foh.dhhs.gov or call **(800) 457-9808**.